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Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream

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Doris Kearns

seven presidents were elected and deposed in Haiti. The last, Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, was actually dragged from asylum in the French Legation and torn to pieces by an enraged mob in the street outside.

Haiti, the second oldest "republic" in the Western Hemisphere, was in a state of almost total anarchy when Rear Adm. William B. Caperton, Commander Cruiser Squadron, U.S. Atlantic Fleet, ordered American forces ashore, Admiral Caperton apparently acted under his own authority in response to urgent demands by the diplomatic corps in Port-au-Prince. Within a matter of hours, however, his orders were confirmed by superiors in the Navy Department.

Intervention in Haiti had long been under consideration in Washington. On 13 January 1915, President Wilson discussed the situation in a memorandum to Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan:

> . . . The more I think about that situation the more I am convinced that it is our duty to take immediate action there such as we took in Santo Domingo. I mean to send a commissioner there who will seek and obtain an interview with the leaders of the various contending factions of the Republic and say to them as firmly and definitely as is consistent with courtesy and kindness that the United States cannot consent to stand by and permit revolutionary conditions constantly to exist there . . . . Is not this your judgment?

The Wilson administration's diplomatic initiative was an utter failure, and in the end order in Haiti was restored only by American arms.

The weeks and months following the intervention were marked by a rapid expansion of American control throughout the country and the establishment of an administration staffed primarily by naval personnel. Little guidance came from Washington, despite Admiral Caperton's pleas for a statement of U.S. policy and intentions. Eventually, however, consent was granted to the election of a new president in Haiti, who was all but nominated by Admiral Caperton and his chief of staff, Capt. Edward L. Beach.

Seeking to legitimize the American presence, the U.S. State Department at last forwarded a treaty proposal to Port-au-Prince that had the practical effect of granting the United States complete financial and military control of the Black Republic. The treaty was fiercely resisted by the Haitians, and when they were forced to accept its terms, all but the trappings of sovereignty were surrendered.

It is probable that the years of intervention gave Haiti the only honest and reasonably efficient government it has ever known. A study of history, however, seems to support the thesis that political freedom, progress, and evolution are seldom, if ever, successfully imposed from without. After an extensive period of "Haitianization," American forces were withdrawn in 1934. Haiti quickly returned to the old ways and ultimately drifted into the nightmare of Papa Doc and the ton ton macoute.

David Healy's short account of the first year of the American intervention in Haiti is well researched, though it suffers somewhat from a rather dry style. Those who read his book may well wish to sample further the rich mine of primary source material that exists concerning a fascinating period in the history of an intriguing land.

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Kearns, Doris. *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream.* New York: Harper & Row, 1976. 432pp.

Initially it would be useful to describe the provenance of this book. In

1967 Miss Kearns, then a Harvard graduate student, was chosen as a White House Fellow for the year 1967-8. On 1 May 1967 (which she misdates as 7 May), she participated in the inauguration ceremonies, met President Lyndon Johnson, and (she says) impressed him so with her talents that he announced *sotto voce* he wanted her to work with him in the White House. However, a time-bomb was ticking away: scheduled for publication in a forthcoming issue of the *New Republic* was an article by Kearns and a fellow graduate student at Harvard entitled "How to Remove LBJ in 1968."

When this appeared, she expected to be asked for her resignation but, after a few weeks, Postmaster General Lawrence O'Brien called her, told her not to worry, but that she would be assigned to the Department of Labor to work with Secretary Willard Wirtz. A year later, after he had declared his noncandidacy, the President asked her to come to the White House and work with him on the preparation of his memoirs. When he went back to Texas, she joined him on a part-time basis, helped draft *The Vantage Point,* and became his confidante. Most of this tendentious tome is devoted to the remarkable dream scenarios that the former President concocted to keep her amused.

So much for the outline. The truth is, as usual, a bit different. One of my tasks in the White House was to keep abreast of the activities of the antiwar activists. I had no plumbing equipment, bugged no telephones, broke no safes—I just relied on a mass of old friends, many of them former students, to keep me up to date on the latest pentecostal manifestations. Thus I was informed of the impending Kearns' *New Republic* article and had a galley proof (thrown over the transom one day) of the contents. This was before the 1 May celebration.

My problem at that point was not Kearns. As far as I was concerned she could be the first White House Fellow assigned to the Governor of American Samoa. The status of the Fellows program, given President Johnson's occasional volcanic eruptions, could be put in jeopardy. When a Peace Corps group in Chile wrote a Santiago newspaper of their opposition to the Vietnam war, for 3 days I thought the guillotine might drop on the whole organization. Working in relays, we calmed LBJ down—though I confess I had some sympathy with his view that Americans officially abroad should keep their traps shut—or resign. I have never supported a Civil Service slot, GS-15: Public Dissenter.

In any event, I found a favorable moment before Kearns arrived on the scene and showed the President the article. Frankly, I held my breath until he began to chuckle (it was a remarkably naive piece of analysis) and told me he was looking forward to this firebrand. The night of the reception, he laid it on with a trowel, kidded her about Harvard, and then in his patented stage whisper (designed to be heard in Georgetown) said she was the one he wanted around the White House. It was a masterful set up; I almost died laughing. Then, in his mischievous way, he let her stew for a while after the article appeared before telling Larry to call her and tell her to report to Wirtz in September.

When in the summer of 1968 Johnson finally asked her to come to the White House, the place was like a graveyard. I mention this because she talks knowingly about staff relations, Vietnam decisions, and other matters of which she had no firsthand knowledge. She leans heavily on George Reedy's book *The Twilight of the Presidency,* a sad tale of how Johnson was surrounded by courtiers and cut off from the world. In candor, this is an autobiographical exercise on Reedy's part: he rejoined Johnson in the spring of 1968, after some unhappy experiences making a living in the outside world, and

occupied an office with no visible function until he departed as surreptitiously as he arrived in January 1969, Reedy's complaint came down to "Why didn't Lyndon talk to me?"

In short, Kearns had no experience in the working White House, where things really jumped. She spent her time in Lame Duck-land where most activity centered on collecting all—and I mean *all*—the documents of the administration for shipment to the LBJ Library in Austin. Each department, for example, was told to prepare a documented history of its activities from 1963 to 1969. Predictably, the result was a shambles (as a professional historian, I flatly refused to take a hand in the game), but Kearns, working under the general direction of Joseph Califano, to whom the President had handed the corpus or body, depending on how you looked at it, spent a lot of time in this paper factory.

The President did, indeed, become quite fond of her and asked her to continue the preparatory work for his memoirs in Texas. The foreign side was supervised by Walt Rostow and William Jorden, currently Ambassador to Panama, and Kearns and others specialized on the chapter-drafts dealing with domestic policy. In the course of this she naturally enough had a good deal of personal contact with the former President and, after the book came out, he asked her to remain in an undefined capacity.

Once again, those with intimate, firsthand knowledge of Lyndon Johnson's way of life spotted the role he had carved out for her. Johnson was the paradigmatic "oral type." Some have said he desperately wanted to be loved—Kearns gets into quite a lather about his alleged "Oedipus complex." I would argue that, while (like all of us) he wanted to be esteemed, he above all wanted an audience, he wanted to be listened to by someone who was not a stringer for the Associated Press, someone in whose presence he could safely blow his (four) stacks.

Several of us in the White House were accustomed to this task: I called it "therapy duty." On a quiet evening about 6, the phone would ring (the direct Presidential line which went off like a fire alarm and automatically put all other calls on "hold"! It had a red button labeled "POTUS," *i.e.*, President Of The United States) and the Leader of the Free World would invite you to join him in the Oval Office. He would then prowl around, pull items off the AP and UPI, (Kearns adds a nonexistent Reuter's) tickers which contributed background music to the decisions of the Johnson Presidency, and comment on them, on what they reminded him of, and on the nature of life.

His comments (untaped, thank God) were often utterly unfair, savage libels on good public servants, and hilarious. He would read an item about a particularly stuffy member of the Cabinet and then mimic the latter in action (he was a superb mimic—I often wished I could have seen him mimic me!). Those who served on the therapy patrol would listen, sometimes agree, sometimes disagree, but basically absorb the id discharges of this brilliant, elemental man.

He could work himself into a fury—not at me, but at the Cosmos in my presence. I figured the President of the United States was covered by the First Amendment guarantee of free speech, so I sat when he sat, stood when he stood, and rarely wasted my breath arguing. (The one topic on which I persistently intervened was Robert Kennedy: he was convinced that not a sparrow fell without the intervention of "Bobby," and it was impossible to budge him. Kearns says Johnson "despised" Robert Kennedy—not true: he envied RFK, he respected him, he hated him. This is very different from despising him.)

Down on the Ranch, LBJ needed an Ear. His daughters were about as interested in his monologues as mine is in

listening to my "fascinating" *recherces de temps perdus,* Lady Bird had heard all the tapes, Harry McPherson, Joe Califano, George Christian, myself, and other White House regulars were off about their own lives. *Enter:* Doris Kearns, notebook in hand and full of pop Freudianism with overtones of Jung. So Kearns became the Ear and Johnson, shrewd rascal that he was, obviously realized she was "into" dreams. Well, if she wanted dreams, he could provide them—real LBJ-sized, Texas dreams. And they are beauts—I suspect, but cannot prove, he had someone digging up good dream scenarios for appropriate use. A "Task Force on Dreams" would certainly have been in the Johnson tradition.

Well, there you have it. A book which provides nothing new in the way of historical information, but demonstrates that even in his last years Lyndon Johnson had not lost his talent for the "treatment." Perhaps Kearns will be memorialized as his last victim.

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Kemp, Geoffrey, Pfaltzgraff, Robert L., Jr., and Ra'anan, Uri, eds. *The Other Arms Race: New Technologies and Non-Nuclear Conflict.* Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1975. 281pp.

In those difficult years when the intellectual opposition to the Indochina war had driven the study of national security from our premier universities, in those unhappy years when some leading academic strategists repudiated their own vocation, Dean Edmund A. Gullion and Professor Uri Ra'anan of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy did a great service to us all by swimming hard against the tide to launch a major program of international security studies. In a climate most unfavorable, they nurtured able young teachers, encouraged students to study strategy when the very word was suspect, and did much to keep alive the fragile tradition of academic work in military matters by teaching, by writing, and by organizing conferences—these being virtually the only gatherings of those days at which one could see academics actively concerned with strategic issues. This book is the record of the third Fletcher Conference held in 1974. Written in the aftermath of the October war, most of the papers reflected the early analyses of the conflict's implications for nonstrategic weapon development.

The very first chapter in the book, James Digby's paper on Precision-Guided Munitions, is something of a classic. In it Digby examined the wider implications of the emergence of PGM's, having been the first to register in print the fundamental notion that all these diverse weapons—antiship, antitank, antiaircraft, air-ground, and air-air missiles as well as guided bombs and projectiles had important things in common, and indeed constituted a new form of force rather than a new kind of weapon. Digby has since developed his ideas in papers written later but published earlier, but his core analysis was already in place: the heightened disadvantage of lumpy high-value assets, the much-increased importance of concealment, the generic power-enhancement of small-scale (but *narrowly specialized*) units, the decline of the logistic sanction over warfare, and, in general, the need to rethink war, *ex novo.*

Mike W. Fossier of Raytheon pursued the analysis of Digby's subject on a narrow front in a short incisive paper on battlefield SAM's; this contains perhaps the first public assessment of SAM effectiveness in the October war that was not marked by wild overstatement.